

# **Curative, regenerating, redemptive and liberating? The systematic production of ignorance in Michael Gove's rhetoric on prison reform at a time of crisis**

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## **Abstract**

Prisons are in a moment of crisis, with a number of recent high-profile scandals receiving substantial media attention and threatening to undermine the hegemony of the institution. At the same time, the work of the current Conservative Government on criminal justice policy as a whole, and on prisons in particular, has been seen by many as a marked departure from their previous penal policy agenda, heralding a new, progressive and broadly liberal direction. Focusing on Michael Gove's rhetoric on prison reform during his term as Justice Secretary (May 2015 to July 2016), this article uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how Gove employed a variety of discursive strategies to create an impression of a liberal, progressive reform agenda, while simultaneously reinforcing the need for an expansive and punitive prison system. Building on recent work on agnotology, it shows that Gove strategically selected, deflected, distorted and ignored the available evidence on prisons. In doing so, he effectively legitimized and reinforced the central role of the prison in the criminal justice system despite increasing evidence of its inefficacy, foreclosing discussion of genuinely radical alternatives.

## **Keywords**

Agnotology, critical discourse analysis, ignorance, Michael Gove, prison reform

## **Introduction**

Let us ensure our prisons are places of hard work, rigorous education and high ambition. Let us free our prisons of drugs and violence and make them places of decency and dignity, hope and purpose. Let us ensure – above all – that criminal justice policy serves the cause of social justice for all.

(Gove, 2015a)

Prisons are in a moment of crisis, marked by increasing evidence of their ineffectiveness and a string of high-profile scandals. These scandals – including a number of prison riots and the publication of figures revealing record levels of violence and suicide in prison (Travis and Pegg, 2017) – have received a great deal of media attention, posing a serious challenge to the public perception of the prison system. The work of the current Conservative Government on criminal justice policy as a whole, and on prisons in particular, has been seen by many as a marked departure from their previous penal policy, heralding a new, progressive direction. Michael Gove, in his role as Secretary of State for Justice, a position he held from May 2015 to July 2016, was praised not only by Conservative colleagues and commentators, but by reformists and traditionally liberal commentators for his recognition of the challenges facing the prison system, for his ‘reforming zeal’ and for his focus on rehabilitation: see e.g. articles and editorials in the *Guardian* and the *Independent* (Anonymous, 2016; Hutton, 2015; Kettle, 2015). This article argues that Gove’s prison reform agenda, despite using the language of modernization, change, rehabilitation and redemption, is far from radical; and is in fact deeply conservative. It reveals that Gove’s rhetoric contributes to the taken-for-granted understanding of the prison whereby the prison is considered legitimate, inevitable, and ‘so “natural” that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it’ (Davis, 2003: 9–10), even in the face of the massive problems in the prison system, and the stark evidence of its failure to meet its own aims of crime reduction and rehabilitation.

## **The scale of the problem**

The current prison population in England and Wales stands at over 85,000, representing an increase of over 90 per cent between 1990 and 2015, and an average rise of 3.6 per cent each year (Dempsey and Allen, 2016). While the prison population as a proportion of the overall population fell gradually in the decades leading up to the Second World War, following the war it began to rise steadily. Following broader trends in Europe and the US, the UK saw a rapid increase in imprisonment through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Importantly, this rise in imprisonment came at a time of falling crime rates (Jansson, 2007), showing that growing imprisonment rates are not simply an automatic response to rising crime levels, but are part of a broader shift towards increasingly punitive criminal justice policy (Pratt et al., 2013). England and Wales now have the highest imprisonment rate in Western Europe, locking up 147 people per 100,000 of the population (Prison Reform Trust, 2016b). The make-up of this population reveals stark inequalities. Disabled and learning disabled people, people with mental health problems and those with alcohol or drug addictions, and people who are homeless or unemployed are all greatly overrepresented in the prison population (Prison Reform Trust, 2016b). Twenty-six per cent of the prison population are from a minority ethnic group, compared to 14 per cent of the general population (Prison Reform Trust, 2016b). There is now a greater disproportionality in the number of Black people in prisons in the UK than in the United States (Prison Reform Trust, 2016b).

By many measures, conditions in prisons are worsening (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2016). The prison system as a whole has been overcrowded in every year since 1994, and a quarter of prisoners are held in overcrowded accommodation.<sup>1</sup> Overcrowding is due, in part, to the fact that prison sentences are getting longer. In 2016 the average prison sentence was 16.2 months; more than three months longer than 10 years earlier. For more serious offences, the average was 56.8 months; 18 months longer than a decade previously (Prison Reform Trust, 2016b). Partly as a result of overcrowding, prisons are getting substantially more violent and more dangerous. In Autumn 2016, the Prison Reform Trust found that people in prison, prisoners and staff, were much less safe than they had been five years earlier (Prison Reform Trust, 2016a): more prisoners were murdered, killed themselves, self-harmed and were victims of assault (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2016). In the 12 months to March 2016, 290 people died in prison: over a third of these deaths were self-inflicted, and six were homicides, the highest number on record (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2016; Prison Reform Trust, 2016b). Serious assaults in prison more than doubled between 2013 and 2016 (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2016; Prison Reform Trust, 2016b). This comes in the context of systemic understaffing – the number of staff employed in the public prison estate fell by over a quarter between 2010 and 2016, as the prison population continued to grow (Prison Reform Trust, 2016a). In addition, there is widespread and serious concern about the ‘authoritarian, occupational culture of prison officers and its insidious impact’ (Sim, 2015), and the lack of democratic control of prisons, illustrated by the systemic ignoring and non-implementation of recommendations made by official bodies (Sim, 2015).

Moreover, prison fails on its own terms: there is mounting evidence on the failure of prisons to achieve their stated aims of rehabilitation and crime control. Prison has a remarkably poor record for reducing re-offending: 46 per cent of adults are reconvicted within a year of release, and for those serving sentences of less than 12 months this increases to 60 per cent (Prison Reform Trust, 2016b). National and international figures show that there is no consistent correlation between prison numbers and levels of crime (Prison Reform Trust, 2016b).

### **Gove’s reform agenda**

Much has been made of the Conservative Government’s increasing focus on prison policy since their election in 2015, and in particular of Michael Gove’s work as Justice Secretary. Gove’s broader reform agenda was heralded as a radical and progressive move away from the earlier ‘tough on crime’, ‘hang ’em and flog ’em’ politics of Conservative, Coalition and New Labour governments (Kettle, 2015). This view has come not only from right wingers: Gove has faced criticism from within his party for being too liberal and for allowing himself to be influenced by reform organizations like the Howard League (Simons, 2016) but also from liberal and reformist commentators. Writing in the *Guardian* in the wake of Gove’s speech at the 2015 Conservative Party Conference, Martin Kettle proclaimed it ‘the most reformist speech by a senior Tory minister – and possibly by any minister – on penal policy for decades’. Kettle argued that, in acknowledging the dire state of the prison estate and its abject failure to rehabilitate, ‘Gove’s penal thinking inhabits a completely different world’ from previous Ministers’, and that ‘[a]nyone with an ounce of reformist practicality or liberalism in them should be cheering him on’ (Kettle, 2015); while the

Howard League's chief executive described it as 'impressive' (Crook, 2015, cited in Sim, 2015).

To some extent, Gove's limited record does suggest a shift in direction from previous Coalition and New Labour government policy: soon after his appointment in 2015, Gove abandoned a Ministry of Justice contract that would have seen the UK government involved in the construction of prisons in Saudi Arabia, and scrapped the courts charge, which penalized those who pleaded not guilty. Most celebrated, perhaps, was his reversal of two of his predecessor Chris Grayling's policies: a ban on prisoners receiving books in prison, and much-criticized legal aid reforms (Lewis, 2016; Simons, 2016). Gove has characterized his agenda as introducing 'a new and unremitting emphasis in our prisons on reform, rehabilitation and redemption' (Gove, 2015a). His substantive policy proposals, however, consist broadly of a project of building new prisons and modernizing the estate, at a cost of £1.3 billion (Gove, 2016d) and handing more autonomy to prison Governors, amidst overall cuts to funding and staffing, privatization and deregulation (Lanktree, 2015; Ministry of Justice and HM Treasury, 2015). The Queen's Speech in May 2016 announced a Prisons and Courts Reform Bill, which would introduce new 'Reform Prisons', characterized by decentralized control over prison management, alongside performance measures for prisons; and reforms to prison education (Ministry of Justice, 2016). The Bill, however, was not published until February 2017 – and then quickly shelved in light of the June 2017 snap general election. More specific policy proposals have included measures to introduce harsher restrictions and more surveillance to tackle the availability of illegal drugs and mobile phones in prison (Gove, 2015b).

In large part, Gove's prison reform agenda has echoed the Conservative Party's policy in other areas, including welfare and education (in particular, the academies model, whereby state-funded schools are funded directly by central government and head teachers are given much greater control over the day-to-day running of the school (Roberts, 2017)). It draws heavily on discourses of 'autonomy' for providers (in the shape of deregulation or privatization), 'accountability' and 'transparency' through increased data collection, and linking payment to performance. This article aims to question the view of Gove's reform agenda as essentially liberal, or even radical. Rather, it focuses on revealing the rhetorical strategies that Gove uses to legitimize an essentially conservative reform agenda and preclude discussion of genuinely radical changes to the prison system.

### **Radical alternatives to the current prison system**

Gove's reform agenda sits within a long history of debate around prison reform, which has been on-going since the emergence of the modern prison as the central mechanism of criminal punishment in the 18th century (McGowen, 1995). Without denying the significant improvements brought about by reformers, the scale of the problems facing the contemporary prison system arguably suggests a need for a more fundamental re-evaluation of the prison as an institution and how it is used. The focus on *reform* has consistently offered the prison as the solution to its own problems (Sim, 2009) rather than asking fundamental questions about whether, and why, we need prisons.

Proposing a radical reduction in the use of imprisonment, or its total abolition, is not to deny that conflicts and social harms must be taken seriously and addressed. The impact of crime, particularly on the most marginalized in society, is frighteningly real (Moore

and Roberts, 2016). Rather, it is to argue that not only is prison an ineffective approach to crime control, but that it generates a great deal of social harm (Sim, 2009). Developing alternatives to the prison requires addressing both the deeply entrenched social and economic inequalities within which penal regimes are embedded, and which they actively perpetuate, and the way that society deals with harmful behaviours. This involves challenging the pervasive logic of punishment that underpins the current system, and a qualitative shift away from the rationale of retribution or vengeance and inflicting suffering on perpetrators – instead focusing on providing reconciliation, reparation and assistance for victims (Davis, 2003; Gottschalk, 2015; Scott, 2017).

Radical social policies of wealth redistribution such as the introduction of a universal basic income, a maximum wage, greater investment in education, training, employment, housing, health and leisure services for all, and more participatory and genuinely democratic political processes would go a long way towards making society safer for all (Scott, 2017; Sim, 2009). Even without these broader structural changes, prison populations could be radically and quickly reduced through immediate political interventions to keep people from entering the prison system, and to decrease the number of people already in prison. These include a permanent moratorium on prison building and the closure of existing prisons; raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility; reducing the use of pre-trial, pre-conviction and pre-sentencing detention; decriminalizing certain ‘victimless crimes’; using imprisonment only in the small minority of cases where offenders pose serious threats to public safety; and programmes of early release, probation and amnesties (Gottschalk, 2015; Scott, 2017; Van Zyl Smit, 2007). Non-custodial and non-punitive means of dealing with conflict and harmful behaviours – including therapy programmes, restorative justice, the use of peer juries etc. – could effectively replace existing criminal processes (Scott, 2017). This article shows how Gove’s rhetoric on prison reform uses a variety of discursive devices to effectively silence these radical discussions about alternatives to the prison, instead supporting and augmenting the popular imagination of the prison as necessary and inevitable.

## **Methodology**

### **Data set**

This analysis examines Gove’s publicly available speeches, statements, letters and newspaper articles on prison reform during his term as Justice Secretary. It focuses on three key speeches: a speech to the Prisoner Learning Alliance soon after his appointment following the general election in May 2015 (Gove, 2015b), his speech to the Conservative Party Conference in October 2015 (Gove, 2015a) and a speech to the Governing Governors’ Forum in May 2016 (Gove, 2016a). In addition, it draws on Gove’s written statements to Parliament (Gove, 2015c, 2016d), an article by Gove and his predecessor Chris Grayling published in the Telegraph in February 2016 (Grayling and Gove, 2016), Gove’s oral evidence to the Justice Committee’s session on prison reform in March 2016 and his written response to the Justice Committee’s report on prison safety in May 2016 (Gove, 2016c). Without claiming to be exhaustive, this sample covers a range of important speeches and written documents which, taken together, give a good sense of Gove’s discursive construction of prisons and his reform agenda. As the analysis shows, these various documents share a number of key themes that crop up again and again across Gove’s rhetoric.

## Analytical framework

This article uses a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. CDA is broadly concerned with critically investigating how discourse (broadly defined as a process of ‘meaning-making’, encompassing written and spoken language but also visual meaning-making) figures in the establishment, reproduction and change of unequal power relations (Fairclough, 2016). CDA is especially concerned with how language is used to construct common sense, or a taken-for-granted perspective of the world, and discursive strategies that legitimize and naturalize meaning (Mason, 2006). This article uses a CDA framework to examine how Gove produces and reproduces certain kinds of knowledge that serve to legitimize the primacy of the prison, but it also explores how he systematically produces and reproduces ignorance of the true scale and nature of the problems facing the prison system.

It draws on the concept of agnotology to examine how ignorance, like knowledge, is culturally and politically produced, reproduced, transmitted and employed. Originally coined by Robert Proctor in his study of the tobacco industry’s systematic production of public ignorance about the health effects of smoking (Proctor and Schiebinger, 2008), agnotology provides a concept for analyzing how ignorance, doubt, uncertainty and ambiguity are deliberately manufactured and maintained. Recent scholarship has shown how ignorance, as well as knowledge, works as an important commodity for many organizations and industries; from anti-environmentalist businesses disputing the certainty of climate change, to insurance industries, to financial securities traders who profit from uncertainty in markets (see McGoey, 2016; Rayner, 2016).

In the context of recent political developments, much attention has been focused on the role of knowledge, and ignorance, in contemporary politics, with a particular focus on ‘post-truth politics’, whereby ‘objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’ (Jeffries, 2017). Indeed, Gove himself has featured in these debates, deflecting criticism about the lack of expert evidence on the potential economic benefits of Brexit with his assertion that British people ‘have had enough of experts’ (cited in Katz, 2017). This article, then, is not arguing that Gove’s strategic uses of knowledge and ignorance are unique. Rather, current debates suggest that the management of ignorance might be a hallmark of contemporary politics. As Linsey McGoey (2016) argues, the cultivation of ‘strategic unknowns’ is an exceptionally powerful political resource. David Graeber (2016), among others, has highlighted the important role of ignorance – or a ‘divorce between consensus and reality’ – in the construction of a political consensus around austerity. Tom Slater’s work (Slater, 2014, 2016) has been important in showing how think tanks, policy elites and conservative politicians have worked together to shore up the politics of austerity. He shows how such institutions strategically ignore the structural causes of poverty in the UK, instead focusing on stigmatizing and depoliticized behavioural and cultural explanations – family breakdown, ‘worklessness’, personal irresponsibility – that serve to legitimize punitive welfare reform (Slater, 2014, 2016).

This article takes a somewhat similar approach, considering how Gove’s rhetoric on prison reform manufactures and maintains ignorance of the reality of the prison system, and exploring the political implications of this misinformation. It explores the various

ways in which the production of ignorance is employed to reproduce the 'penal common sense' (Wacquant, 1999) that holds that prisons are necessary and essentially beneficial. It shows that Gove uses various strategies, including denial, dismissal and diversion (Rayner, 2016), to shore up the Conservative Government's increasingly punitive prison policy. This is ironic since Gove has said, in response to the alarming recent figures for deaths in custody and violence in prisons, 'There's no point trying to minimize, excuse or divert attention away from the increasing problems we face' (Gove, 2016a, see also 2016c). Yet, this article contends, that is exactly what he does.

## **Discussion**

This article argues that Gove's rhetoric on prison reform strategically produces and reproduces ignorance in three key ways. First, it argues that Gove's presentation of the problem at hand is highly selective. He presents the problems facing the prison system as a matter of individual morality and responsibility, while conspicuously ignoring the systemic and cultural problems that require genuine social change, or wholesale rethinking of the system, rather than the programme of deregulation and prison building that Gove suggests. Second, it shows how Gove focuses heavily on the danger and threat posed by prisoners to society, casting the prison as an essential means of keeping society safe, and diverting attention from debates around alternative means of addressing social harm. Finally, the article focuses on Gove's proposals for prison reform, drawing on Stuart Hall's notion of 'regressive modernization' (Hall, 1987; Sim, 2015) to show how Gove invokes a potent combination of neoliberal market logic, individual responsibility and Victorian morality to construct a misleading vision of the prison as a site of redemption.

### **Individual responsibility and structural challenges**

Gove has been praised for acknowledging the crisis facing the current prison system in a way that the previous minister Chris Grayling did not (Hutton, 2015; Kettle, 2015). Indeed, Gove portrays the current prison estate as dirty, disorderly, dangerous and drug-filled; as 'out-of-date, overcrowded and in far too many cases, insanitary and inadequate' (Gove, 2015b). He acknowledges that 'violence towards prisoners and prison staff is increasing and incidences of self-harm and suicide are also increasing', and that such conditions 'cannot begin to prepare [offenders] for a better, more moral, life' (Gove, 2015b). Moreover, he states that it is ineffective at reducing crime. As noted above, these issues could be (and indeed are by many more radical reformers and abolition groups) seen as a reason to look broadly at why and how prisons are used, and how they could be used far less widely, or even closed altogether. Gove, however, offers no such conclusions. By selectively acknowledging the challenges facing prisons – framing them as *individual* problems – Gove obscures those structural problems that require wholesale change to the prison system, and justifies a highly conservative reform agenda.

Summing up the purpose of his plans for prison reform to the Justice Select Committee, Gove described his aim as 'turning prisoners from liabilities into assets', by giving 'the state a chance to turn them into people who can contribute' to society (Gove, 2016b). By instilling a sense of individual responsibility, the prison system can transform prisoners into moral actors whose worth is measured in economic terms of their net contribution to an imaginary social economy. For Gove, a fully modernized prison regime holds the

power to produce the perfect neoliberal citizens, as he set out in a speech to the Governing Governors' Forum: 'Productive. Hard-working. Respected. Responsible. Able to look after children and family. And a proud tax-payer! What more could any government or governor want of a prisoner?' (Gove, 2016a). A similar idea of a rational, calculating, purely self-interested *homo economicus* underlies Gove's plans for the prison system. His plans for reforming prison education, for example, rest on a system of incentives, rewards and 'earned release' for those who attend.

The neoliberal logic of individual responsibility and entrepreneurialism is not only applied to prisoners, but also to those running prisons. The single greatest area of focus in Gove's agenda is handing more autonomy to prison governors: he argues that 'the only way to reduce violence in our prisons is to give Governors and those who work in prisons the tools necessary to more effectively reform and rehabilitate offenders' (Gove, 2016c). This is arguably little more than 'a clever move from central government to shift responsibility for managing inadequate budgets to governors' (Garside and Addicott, 2017: 5). The second key tenet of Gove's reform agenda involves building new prisons, outside of city centres, to expand the estate and to free up valuable urban land for sale. In this modern prison estate, 'the dark corners that facilitate bullying, drug-taking and violence could increasingly be designed out' (Gove, 2015b).

As Steve Rayner (2016) argues, setting up a decoy problem that diverts attention from the real question at hand is a key strategy in the mobilization of ignorance as a political resource. Gove's focus on modernizing the physical estate and ensuring 'autonomy' for prison governors as the solution to the prison crisis effectively acts as a decoy to deflect attention from the structural and systemic problems facing the prison as an institution (Treadwell, 2016). By holding individuals to account for the success or failure of prisons, Gove obscures the spectrum of deep-rooted and systemic problems at hand.

The same reductive logic of individual responsibility underpins Gove's explanation of why people end up in prison: 'People go to prison because they have made bad choices ... They are – overwhelmingly – drawn from the ranks of those who have grown up in circumstances of the greatest deprivation of all – *moral deprivation*' (Gove, 2015b, emphasis added). People end up in prison, Gove asserts, due to their poor choices – prisoners having 'not made the most of whatever talents they have' (Gove, 2015b) – but also their *moral* deficit. As Gove puts it, it 'should not surprise us that young people who grow up in circumstances where the moral reinforcement *the rest of us* enjoy is absent are more likely to make bad choices' (Gove, 2015b, emphasis added). While Gove acknowledges that the prison population is disproportionately made up of people from particular backgrounds – to some extent acknowledging the structural factors in criminality and criminalization – he focuses overwhelmingly on moral deprivation, rather than deep-seated political and economic inequalities. The line between us and 'them', for Gove, is drawn along the lines of 'the temptation to do the wrong but convenient thing and the willingness to follow the right, but hard course' (Gove, 2015b), 'the propensity to lie and the determination to be honest, the tendency to cut moral corners and the inclination to serve rather than seize' (Gove, 2015b). Virtue, or its deficit, is tied firmly to the family and the home – especially as the result of a lack of 'proper parenting' (Gove, 2015b). In other cases, he acknowledges the impact of systemic social inequalities but dismisses their relevance by emphasizing that 'many people grow up in difficult circumstances and go on to lead successful lives' (Grayling and Gove, 2016), and



that recognizing prisoners' difficult backgrounds 'should not lead us to weaken our attachment to the codes, rules and laws which keep our nation civilized' (Gove, 2015b). Gove places the blame for 'moral deprivation', then, squarely on individuals, parents and the family, and his 'solutions' echo this logic: 'tighter rules on truancy, more sanctions for bad behaviour and ... welfare changes which support more people into work and provide the right incentives for the right choices' (Gove, 2015b).

This pathologizing and individualizing discourse echoes the Conservative Government's broader approach to reform of public services, whereby structural divisions and inequalities are strategically ignored in favour of behavioural explanations that can be addressed by conservative 'reform' programmes. This can be understood as part of a broader shift in the configuration of citizenship and responsibility under neoliberalism. Under New Labour, the Coalition Government and the Conservatives, liberal understandings of citizenship, as a universal status that offers rights and protections, have been displaced by categories of 'active' and 'earned' citizenship (Colomb, 2007). An individual's success or failure, then, is attributed not to systemic or structural factors but to their own 'entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings' (Harvey, 2007: 65), legitimizing the marginalization, exclusion and, ultimately, expulsion from the social body of those who fail to 'earn' their place (Tyler, 2013). As Slater (2014) describes, 'social pathologies' (family breakdown, 'worklessness', antisocial behaviour, lack of personal responsibility, out-of-wedlock childbirth and 'dependency') are repeatedly invoked by conservative politicians and policy-makers to legitimize punitive social policy reform and, in turn, to obscure the further inequalities caused by these reforms (see e.g. Crossley, 2016 on the 'troubled families' initiative). Gove's focus on moral deprivation works as an effective decoy to divert attention from the material or social inequalities – social class and poverty, in particular – that shape individuals' life chances, and which require a more radical set of interventions than Gove proposes. Focusing on individual and moral failings is a crucial mechanism for maintaining the legitimacy of the prison.

Gove's focus on highly classed ideas of morality and upbringing as the root causes of crime also diverts attention from, and renders invisible, the wide range of serious social harms committed by those at the top of the social scale, which are largely ignored by the criminal justice system, such as the significant environmental and economic harms wrought by large corporations and tax avoidance/evasion by the richest in society (Mathiesen, 2006). The 'systemic and rampant criminality of the powerful, inside and outside of the state, mostly perpetrated by well-educated individuals from allegedly well-integrated, functional and respectable families', thus remains marginal to political debates about crime and punishment (Sim, 2015).

### **Distorting discourses of danger**

Prisons do work in isolating dangerous offenders from the rest of society, contributing to safer homes and streets. Prisons also work by punishing those who defy the law and prey on the weak, by depriving them of their liberty. Civilization depends on clear sanctions being imposed by the state on those who challenge the rules which guarantee liberty for the law-abiding.  
(Gove, 2015b)

Discourses of danger and threat are crucial in Gove's arguments for the continuing primacy of the prison. The 'true purpose' of prisons, says Gove, is 'keeping people safe by

making people better' (Grayling and Gove, 2016) – that is, keeping us safe by making them better. Prisons 'serve the highest purpose of all – making our society safer, more secure and more civilized' (Gove, 2016a). By constructing prisoners as dangerous and threatening, this discourse serves to reaffirm the need for the prison as a means of incapacitation by containment, providing an effective justification for the on-going use of the prison on a large scale. Creating an imagination of the typical prisoner as a grave threat to society and 'civilization', and prison as the means of correcting them, is not only a distortion of the make-up of the prison population, but diverts attention from the fact that prison is simply not effective in rehabilitating offenders (Prison Reform Trust, 2016b). In reality, the majority of people in prison are not dangerous murderers, sexual offenders or robbers, but are imprisoned for non-violent offences. Seventy-one per cent of men and 81 per cent of women in prison are serving sentences for non-violent offences and, even among those remanded in custody while awaiting trial, 60 per cent are accused of non-violent crimes (Prison Reform Trust, 2015). In terms of the production of ignorance, this is an effective means of maintaining the perception that prisons are needed to control a threatening population who would otherwise pose a violent threat to society's safety. Representations of the prison as an 'institution full of murderers, rapists and paedophiles precludes a long overdue debate about prison suicides, the erosion of prisoners' rights and the rising number of women and children incarcerated' (Mason, 2006: 251). Though Gove does acknowledge the danger posed to prisoners by violence from other prisoners, and the shockingly high rates of self-harm and suicide, as David Scott points out, the Conservative Government's recent focus on episodes of prisoner violence against prison staff provides a distorted picture of violence in prisons, where violence perpetrated by prison staff on prisoners is obscured or rendered invisible (Scott, 2016).

In casting all prisoners as a threat to society, this rhetoric casts the public – 'the rest of society' from which prisoners are discursively and physically excluded – as potential victims who are at risk and whose safety must be protected. The figure of the victim has often been invoked by politicians to enforce a vision of order 'where the victimized would be protected from the ravages of the degenerate, deprived and depraved' (Sim, 2009: 75). This discourse builds on a historical process of politicization of victims' rights which began in the 1970s and was accelerated by New Labour who 'symbolically positioned those who disagreed with their [law and order] policy as pro-criminal and anti-victim' (Sim 2009: 75), effectively claiming the ideological and moral high ground for punitive penal policy. The discourse of victims' rights functions to cast doubt upon, or foreclose altogether, discussions about prisoners' welfare and rights and has been central to the legitimization of an increasingly punitive criminal justice system (Mason, 2006).

The othering of prisoners is also constructed through an us/them rhetoric which draws a clear line between 'offenders' and the general public, figured as 'the rest of us'. This discourse of morality and virtue draws heavily on the idea of civilization. First, it sets up a polarity between 'civilized behaviour' and criminality, figuring this distinction as a necessary condition for a fair, moral and free society: '[People who have made bad choices] have to be punished because no society can protect the weak and uphold virtue unless there is a clear bright line between civilized behaviour and criminality' (Gove, 2015b). 'The first remarkable thing I've found about our approach towards incarceration in England and Wales is how many good people there are in prison', Gove says at the outset of his speech to the Prisoner Learning Alliance (Gove, 2015b). But this refers only

to the 'good' prison staff – presumably among his audience. Prisoners are referred to only as 'offenders', constructing an image of people in prison as a faceless, nameless mass to be 'managed', constructing a stark opposition between the prison directors, governors and officers – referred to by job title and several times by name – and those in prison. This othering and dehumanizing language defines those in prison solely by their status as having been convicted of a crime – though in fact a significant proportion of the men, women and children in prison have not been convicted of anything, since people on remand currently make up 12 per cent of the total prison population, the majority of whom (68 per cent) are awaiting trial, whilst the rest await sentencing (Prison Reform Trust, 2016b).

These divisive and polarizing ideas are repeated again and again throughout the same speech, with Gove stating that we must not 'shy away from the punishment necessary to uphold those rules and protect the weak', since 'civilization depends on clear sanctions being imposed by the state on those who challenge the rules which guarantee liberty for the law-abiding' (Gove, 2015b). 'Civilization' is a key theme across Gove's rhetoric on prison reform. He frames the criminal justice system as 'the cement of civilisation' (Gove, 2015a) and prison as a key mechanism of maintaining a civilized society. It is worth unpacking what is at stake when Gove draws on the idea of 'civilization' to justify punitive penal policy. The discourse of civilization has been central to the imaginative geographies and histories that have shaped Western racism and imperialism (Said, 2003), and has historically functioned as a means of identifying and ordering value in the world, and a means of marking the Self from the Other (Duara, 2004). The concept has been mobilized throughout history by different groups, politics and movements to legitimize different sorts of claims to power, with the notion gathering particular currency around the turn of the century with the combination of enlightenment thought and Darwinian ideas of human evolution (Bederman, 1996). While the idea of civilization played a central role in justifying Western Europe's imperial domination of the rest of the world, constructed as a 'civilizing mission' (Duara, 2004; Said, 2003), it has also been intimately involved in shaping power relations along lines of race, class and gender within nations (see e.g. Bederman, 1996). In the 21st century, the discourse of civilization is invoked regularly in political discourse – most familiarly, perhaps, in the 'clash of civilizations' rhetoric used to legitimize 'the war on terror' as a war of freedom against fear, and civilization against barbarism (Fairclough, 2013).

Gove constructs a clear distinction between a civilized public – figured as actual or potential victims of crime – and a degenerate, criminal 'other'. By constructing the prison as the site of law, order and civilization, the stigmatized figure of the offender is positioned as the dangerous, violent antithesis of civilization and enlightenment. This is an important strategy in Gove's maintenance of the ignorance of the prison system, since it obscures the reality of the make-up of the prison population – which includes large numbers of people convicted of non-violent crimes, or of no crime at all. In framing prison as the cement of civilization, Gove powerfully reinforces the idea that the prison is crucial for the safety of society. This discourse is important in legitimizing the continuing use of the prison as a means of containment and control, procuring consent for punitive prison policy and preventing the debate from moving towards genuinely different alternatives.

## The prison as a site of redemption

Let us take that reforming zeal into the dark corners of our prison system and bring redemption to those who were lost.  
(Gove, 2015a)

At the same time as presenting his reform agenda as a project of modernization, and as a means of keeping society safe and civilized, Gove's view on the role of the prison invokes a curious combination of retribution, revenge and redemption to construct a powerful notion of punishment as a moral imperative that is almost so self-evident as to need no further justification: 'No moral society can tolerate law-breaking without punishment', writes Gove (2015a). Though Gove claims that his reform agenda is motivated by a focus on rehabilitation, his understanding of the purpose of prison is clearly underpinned by a retributive idea that '[j]ustice must be done' (Grayling and Gove, 2016).

Gove acknowledges that under the current system there is a 'collective failure to redeem and rehabilitate offenders' (Gove, 2015b). This is in part due to the outdated prison infrastructure – to be solved by a neoliberal overhaul, as outlined above – but Gove argues that 'the most important transformation ... we need to make is not in the structure of the estate, it's in the soul of its inmates' (Gove, 2015b). Through strict discipline, hard work and education, prisoners can be redeemed from evil, from 'idleness and futility' (Gove, 2015b). Prison is cast as 'curative and regenerating'; even, painfully ironically, as 'liberating' (Gove, 2015b): in an article written with Chris Grayling, Gove describes his role as rescuing offenders from lives of crime (Grayling and Gove, 2016). Gove has drawn on Churchill's words to frame his prison agenda as a redemptive mission: 'There is a treasure, if only you can find it, in the heart of every man, said Churchill. It is in that spirit we will work' (Gove, 2015b). This moral transformation can turn irresponsible offenders into 'moral actors and better citizens' fit for 'the world of industry' (Gove, 2015b). Again, a focus on individual morality – in this case, figured in terms of redemption of prisoners' *souls* – functions as a decoy to draw debate away from the abject failure of prisons to reduce crime or 'rehabilitate' offenders.

Gove has been clear that his position on prison policy is informed by his Christian faith. In response to critics from the right wing of his party who accuse him of being too soft in his approach to justice, Gove has said:

[i]t's because I am a Conservative I believe in the rule of law as the foundation stone of our civilization. It's because I'm a Conservative I believe that evil must be punished. But it's also because I'm a Conservative and a Christian I believe in redemption.  
(Gove, 2016a, cited in Simons, 2016)

Casting the role of the prison and its staff in religious terms serves to cast the state and the institution in a light of charity and morality, obscuring the structural violence that is so well documented by the steady stream of independent reports on the damage wrought by the prison on those detained (Harris, 2015; HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2016). Casting punishment in religious terms invokes a moral authority, a legitimacy that is granted not by the public or even the state, but by a higher power. Gove frames the actions of prison staff in terms of faith, too:

The exhortation in St Matthew's Gospel to help the hungry, the sick and the imprisoned is taken seriously, and lived out, by thousands of our fellow citizens every week. We should celebrate their example, and the faith which sustains them.  
(Gove, 2015b)

Likening 'the imprisoned' – and indeed the hungry – to the sick, and highlighting the moral duty to 'help' them, Gove completely ignores and obscures the historical, economic and highly political context in which people become criminalized. 'The imprisoned' is cast as a timeless, inevitable category of people; and the moral imperative is not to challenge their imprisonment in itself, but to 'help' them by bringing them to moral redemption in the eyes of the benevolent state. This sort of discourse plays into normalization of the prison as a taken-for-granted part of social life: as Angela Davis has it, the normalization of the prison is so fully established that '[i]t is as if prison were an inevitable fact of life, like birth and death' (Davis, 2003: 15). Invoking the language of faith, and a rose-tinted view of the past, is a key mechanism through which Gove glosses over the failures of the prison and procures public consent for a 'reform' agenda that poses no challenge to the current scale or purpose of the prison.

The 'solutions' that Gove proposes, then, are marked by a seemingly contradictory combination of neoliberal 'modernization' and Victorian religious rhetoric of morality and redemption. As Joe Sim (2015) argues, Gove's curious combination of market logic and nostalgic, almost archaic notions of civilization and morality might be understood as a project of 'regressive modernization'. As Sim (2015) suggests, Stuart Hall's (1987) analysis of Thatcherism as a project of 'regressive modernization' is instructive in analyzing this apparent paradox. For Hall, Thatcherism's project was to fundamentally transform, indeed reverse, the ground rules and values of the post-war social settlement. Following the Second World War, argues Hall, an English common sense was established around the notion that the welfare state 'had come to stay' (Hall, 1987: 17), and that the market was no longer an appropriate measure of need or an organizing principle for society. Thatcherism, then, was a project to contest and dismantle that common sense. Crucially for Hall, this project to shore up the hegemonic power of the 'new' state, the market and society at large was simultaneously progressive and reactionary. As well as being a project of forward-looking modernization – embracing the logic of the market – it was 'deeply regressive, ancient and archaic' (Hall, 1987: 17), harking back to Victorian values and morals. Thatcherism constructed 'a politics and an image of what modernity would be like' by 'drawing on the past, looking backwards to former glories rather than forwards to a new epoch' (Hall, 1987: 17). In the current moment, Gove's reform agenda presents a similarly reactionary vision of modernization. Gove presents himself as a progressive, liberal and modern reformer, while simultaneously invoking a highly traditional, regressive perspective on the nature of crime and the role of the prison. By emphasizing its role in redeeming inmates, and upholding morality and civilization, Gove portrays the prison as a benevolent institution, and the continual growth of the prison system as a moral crusade. As this analysis has shown, processes of managing and maintaining ignorance are crucial both in Gove's construction of his prison agenda as a radical programme of modernization, and in his framing of prison as a lynchpin of civilization and morality.

## Conclusions

This article has used a CDA approach to examine how Michael Gove's rhetoric has contributed to the production and reproduction of the taken-for-granted idea that the prison is, and should be, a central part of the criminal justice system. Drawing on recent work on agnotology, it has paid particular attention to the ways in which Gove denies, distorts and distracts from the reality of the crisis facing the prison system. This article has shown how Gove's disingenuous discursive construction of the purpose of the prison and the nature of its problems, and his proposed solutions, make a vital contribution to a common sense notion of the prison as necessary and inevitable, and even as a benevolent, liberating and redeeming institution. It has been argued that ignorance works as an important political resource, playing a crucial role in maintaining 'the ideological limitations placed upon what are considered appropriate and feasible means of social and penal transformation' (Scott, 2017: 36), shoring up a reform agenda based on expansion and privatization, and diverting attention away from debates about radical alternatives to the current prison system.

This article has argued that Gove's distinctive combination of neoliberal logic (emphasizing principles of autonomy, transparency and individual responsibility) and Victorian values (linking the prison to redemption and civilization) provides a deeply conservative and regressive view of the future of the prison. By focusing on *moral* deprivation as the explanation for people being imprisoned, Gove obscures the complex social, political and economic causes of crime and criminalization. He strategically ignores the fundamental problems facing the prison as an institution – its failure to achieve its own stated goals of rehabilitation, huge funding cuts and an ingrained culture of violence – instead blaming a lack of autonomy for prison governors. This allows him to justify a policy of deregulation and decentralization in line with broader neoliberal governance in the context of austerity. By drawing on stigmatizing discourses of civilization, Gove effectively constructs prisoners as a dangerous and threatening 'other' from which the 'rest of society' must be defended, obscuring the fact that the majority of people in prison are not convicted of a violent crime. By equating crime and criminality with the poor, this discourse also renders invisible the crimes of the most powerful in society.

Though this article focuses on Gove's time as Justice Secretary, developments since his departure in June 2016 suggest a need to continue to pay critical attention to the way that knowledge and ignorance are mobilized in debates on prison reform. Following the EU membership referendum, Gove's role was taken on by Elizabeth Truss, who came under fire for her poor management of a string of high-profile incidents in prisons (Travis and Pegg, 2017). A cabinet reshuffle following the Conservatives' poor performance in the general election in June 2017 saw Truss replaced by David Lidington. At the time of writing, the prisons crisis rumbles on, with much public criticism of government policy from organizations including the Prison Governors Association (Khomami, 2017). The future of the Government's prison reform agenda is unclear, with the short-lived Prisons and Courts Bill (introduced in February 2017) withdrawn in anticipation of the general election. While Lidington has promised that 'the work to make our prisons true places of reform and rehabilitation is already under way – and it will continue unabated' (Lidington, 2017), prison reform was markedly absent from the June 2017 Queen's Speech (Bulman, 2017). Early indications from Lidington suggest a continuation of Gove's

key rhetorical themes – combining a rhetorical emphasis on rehabilitation with a clear assumption of punishment as a moral good in itself – and an expansionist policy direction, signalled by his alarming promise to create 10,000 new prison places (Lidington, 2017).

This article has shown how ignorance works as a strategic political resource, and how doubt, ambiguity and misinformation are mobilized to create and maintain a particular discursive truth around the prison. Having argued that the production of ignorance is instrumental in maintaining the hegemonic dominance of the prison, it is important to consider the kinds of knowledge that might challenge this state of affairs. As David Scott (2017) has argued, moving towards more genuinely progressive approaches to justice requires a shift in the framing of crime and punishment. As well as developing more realistic media representations of the prison, countering the distorting depictions that are prevalent in both news coverage and fictional accounts of the prison (see e.g. Mason, 2006), this must also involve a reframing of punishment in political discourse, and, specifically, more accurate depictions of the effects of punishment. This knowledge certainly exists: there is a wealth of evidence on the shocking conditions in prisons, including a significant body of reports from the Prisons Inspectorate, the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman and coroners – most of which go ignored and whose recommendations are never implemented (Sim, 2015). The vital work that prisoners themselves, public protests, prisoners' rights organizations and third sector organizations do in bringing attention to the harm wrought by prisons and the long term impact of criminalization on people's lives plays a crucial part in challenging the misinformation, reinforced by Gove, that prisons, with a little reform, can be places of virtue and rectitude.

#### **Note**

1. Overcrowding is defined by the prison service as a prison containing more prisoners than the establishment's Certified Normal Accommodation, or 'the good, decent standard of accommodation that the [prison] service aspires to provide all prisoners' (Prison Reform Trust, 2016b).

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