

Résumé du contenu/English Summary

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RÉSUMÉ DU CONTENU / ENGLISH SUMMARY

Translation : D. Crelinsten

In California — and other American States — the citizens are refusing to pay their taxes. They say the services they receive are not commensurate with the expense incurred. It is time, then, that public attitudes be studied. True, the social services and hospitals take up a greater portion of government budgets than does the criminal justice system, but law enforcement is nonetheless costly.

It is essential, therefore, to know what the citizens expect in term of state protection, of both their person and property, as well as to find out their views on punishment and the resocialization of criminals. First of all, do they seek vengeance or do they look for the social reintegration of those who refuse to conform to the accepted rules of the community ?

This question was answered by Laurent Laplante, a journalist and former member of the Prévost Commission on the administration of justice on criminal and penal matters in Quebec. According to him, public opinion was based on the power of the public authorities to exaggerate, at will, actual or threatened deviance. Generally speaking, his opinion is valid, but there are certain sectors where the citizens' reactions are due to specific fears they have experienced. Small businessmen, for example, who were surveyed by our research team, were beset by the fear that when the large stores closed, their shops would be attacked and their tills emptied. Thus they see themselves as probable victims, and on this basis form their attitude towards the justice system, which very often gives them little protection.

In this regard, we have only to read the court records, where during some trials, witnesses have difficulty in getting a hearing, while in others, they are afraid to demand justice for fear of being blackmailed.

The diverse approaches we have presented in this issue of our review cover the many facets of the criminal phenomenon, as well as pointing out the imperfections and lacks in a justice system required to prove its fairness and effectiveness.

How can public opinion be used to improve the services and develop criminal policies that will be better adapted to the needs of the various communities? How can its reactions be analyzed to reveal the true aspirations of the people? In short, how can one interrogate this mass, whose components, that is, individuals, react in terms of their own experiences and scales of values, none of which are symmetrical or homogeneous?

These are questions that arise not only concerning criminality, but many other domains as well. Today, there is an effort made to have these anonymous masses, the so-called « silent majority », participate in decision-making. As the level of education increases, it distinguishes groups more than age or financial status, and public opinion surveys become more and more sophisticated. We know that tolerance towards criminality is more accentuated among those who see the danger to themselves only theoretically. On the other hand, among those who, because of their work or where they live, feel more exposed to the possibility of criminal attack, the level of this tolerance is much lower. For everyone, however, the media, and the manner in which certain types of news are treated, have a substantial influence. The public judges on the basis of the facts at hand, notes Micheline Baril.

André Normandeau, for his part, in his comments on the reports of commissions of enquiry, states that in public affairs, as in business, vague impressions, personal intuitions or gratuitous assumptions are not sufficient in rendering an account of actual situations.

To evaluate these, public surveys are not completely satisfactory, but they are indicators, nonetheless, that enable administrators to learn, not what the public wants, but at least what it is not ready to accept. In certain sectors, this alone is justification enough for the efforts devoted to enquiries of this type. For even though these are never perfect, though they sometimes run the risk of being influenced, biased or blown up beyond reason, the fact remains that survey techniques are being constantly improved. No one dares refuse any longer to resort to their use, because of the impact of their results, but, as Yves Brillon emphasizes, not without always questioning their true value when it comes to putting reform projects into practice.

These studies must distinguish between prejudice and aspirations for change; they should also show new values along with

the old, thus reflecting a pluralist society. As Christiane Louis-Guérin explains, the psychosociologist studying attitudes is thus able to understand the dynamics of change as well as those of stability. In this way, the study of attitudes becomes a useful base for the development of criminal policy.