While our politicians pander to the populist philosophy that ‘putting ’em behind bars’ will solve the ‘crime problem’, others such as Professor Ross Homel AO have studied concepts that are far more likely to actually work.

A month or two ago, then Police and Corrective Services Minister Judy Spence proudly announced on radio the provision of hundreds of new prison beds in south-east and far north Queensland.

Her enthusiasm was undoubtedly a product of “election campaign fever”, a state of consciousness characterised by a rabid desire to please and a preoccupation with slogans and political symbolism.

The Corrective Services Department website, in offering an explanation for the development of its 3000-bed “prison precinct” at Gatton, provides some interesting insights into criminal justice policies in this state that could not be articulated in the Minister’s sound bite:

Queensland is experiencing unprecedented growth in prisoner numbers. This is not unique to Queensland, but reflects national and international trends. There has been a 142 percent increase in prisoner numbers since July 1993. This growth has been driven by a combination of factors, including a general population increase, more effective policing, changed sentencing practices and an increase in the average length of jail terms.

It is certainly true that Queensland is not unique in Australia, where total prisoner numbers on a population-adjusted basis have grown by 34.8 percent since 1992. It is not hard, moreover, to find countries where the growth in imprisonment rates has been even more pronounced. For example, near neighbour New Zealand felt compelled to increase rates by 58.0 percent in the same period; whereas England and Wales achieved an even more impressive increase of 68.0 percent. By contrast, the United States increased its rate by a mere 43.2 percent – but from an imprisonment level that in 1992 was already close to the highest in the world.

However, other countries with which we like to compare ourselves managed to control crime with a more modest investment in prison cells. The Republic of Ireland, for example, got by with a modest 25.0 percent increase, but this was eclipsed by Finland where the increase was a meager 1.5 percent, despite some serious crime problems fuelled, in part, by high rates of alcohol consumption.

Finland provides a truly instructive lesson for Australia as it seems to get many things right that we continue to find challenging, despite the cultural similarity of the countries in many respects. For example, Finland has maintained high levels of prosperity while achieving amongst the best outcomes in the world for children and young people, whether measured in terms of literacy, numeracy and general educational achievement, health and safety, or material wellbeing.

Even more impressively, its social gradient for health or literacy outcomes is very shallow – the gap between low and high social status groups is relatively small. Especially instructive is Finland’s very low crime rate compared with Australia – while Finland’s rates are near the lowest in all categories, Australia has amongst the highest in the developed world.

Professor Ross Homel is foundation professor of criminology and criminal justice at Griffith University and director of the Griffith Institute for Social and Behavioural Research. He was director of the Australian Research Council Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance between 2004 and 2007, and was responsible for establishing a national set of research priorities to advance the wellbeing of children and young people. Professor Homel was appointed an Officer in the General Division of the Order of Australia (AO) last year “for service to education, particularly in the field of criminology, through research into the causes of crime, early intervention and prevention methods.” Last December he was shortlisted for the 2009 Australian of the Year award.
What the Finnish example teaches us is that it is possible to achieve prosperity, good social outcomes, and low crime rates without resorting to the kinds of “get tough” policies referred to on the Corrective Services website.

To put it bluntly, more and longer prison terms do not create a safer society (except perhaps temporarily while some prolific offenders are taken off the streets), and truly effective policing decreases rather increases the numbers of offenders dealt with by the courts. The criminological research evidence points in a consistent direction — effective crime prevention programs give young people a sense of being citizens rather than outsiders, of having a stake in mainstream society rather than having to make do on the margins.

Effective prevention programs emphasise “getting in early” before crime problems emerge or become entrenched, utilising all the tools that modern research and enlightened practice can offer, such as enriched preschool programs, sensitive, holistic and responsive family support programs for the most vulnerable, targeted home visiting programs by health professionals to socially disadvantaged teen-aged mothers, quality parent training programs such as Triple-P, and Parents and Children’s centres located in schools that can strengthen the links between schools and community and provide a base for a plethora of evidence-based programs that improve the wellbeing of whole schools and neighbourhoods, not just the “at-risk” minority.

The paradox is that the Queensland Government, like governments across Australia, already funds many of these kinds of innovations, or is moving in that direction. According to research by Kate Rizeley, a PhD scholar in criminology at Griffith University, more than 8,000 programs that could be construed broadly as crime prevention initiatives were funded in south-east Queensland in the first few years of this decade.

Limited and short-term funding

Many of these programs have elements of “best practice” embedded in them, although it must be conceded that the prevention and community services field is characterised by limited and short-term funding, fragmentation, and a failure to implement rigorous evaluations. Nevertheless, the Government does seem to be trying.

How do we explain this paradox, and how do we tilt the balance away from punitive — and largely ineffective — policies that have more and bigger prisons as their centrepiece, toward major, sustained investments in research-based and practitioner-informed prevention strategies? With regard to the paradox, the key is to understand politics, and elections in particular, as theatre designed to persuade through emotion, while the business of governing is rather more prosaic, being concerned with value for money and real outcomes, including satisfied customers and problems addressed effectively.

The role of emotion is fundamental in politics, which is why appeals to primordial fears about crime and social chaos and to deep-seated beliefs about justice will win every day over rational and emotionless appeals to evidence. If we are to move rationality and scientific evidence from the margins of policy discourse to the centre of routine practice, we need to engage the community at a visceral level through an alternative vision for our society that fuses compassion and care for the young and the vulnerable with the passionate belief that, perhaps for the first time in human history, we have both the knowledge and the means to create a safer and more just society through the intelligent and sensitive application of the fruits of scientific research.

Notes
1 www.correctiveservices.qld.gov.au/About_Us/The_Department/Precision/Precinct.shtml.