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# Britain's lesson for the GOP

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Will the high-riding Republicans and their tea party allies have the same steely resolve and the courage to buck key constituencies that British Prime Minister David Cameron has shown with his deep and sweeping budget cuts in Britain?

This is the question to be asked as the voices of America's modern right ride toward a predicted set of victories on Nov. 2.

One can imagine the little-or-no-government advocates praising Cameron's "savage" (in the words of *The Economist*) cuts of \$135 billion, including reducing the public payroll by close to half-million jobs. The Brits will even shrink defense by 8 percent, a cut that mainstream U.S. politicians rarely seek.

One figure from London caught my eye especially: prisons. The Tories, in last spring's elections, intimated that prisons were almost wholly full of serious, violent and repeat offenders, and that they'd build more to protect the public.

But faced with a real-world budget crunch, Conservatives adopted a radically different view. They're now prepared to cut the budget for the Ministry of Justice, which runs their prisons, by an astounding 23 percent. And to begin with releasing 3,000 prisoners.

Britain simply has too many offenders behind bars, as Justice Secretary Ken Clarke noted when he said: "We need to create a justice system that punishes the guilty, reduces reoffending, protects our liberties, and helps those most in need."

The new British approach mimics the longtime position of penal reformers everywhere: Focus on rehabilitation instead of incarceration, and begin by cutting the number of people behind bars for minor crimes.

Could we hope for similar enlightenment from America's conservatives? It's hard to be optimistic. It was primarily they, with warnings of rampant crime and the Richard Nixon-inaugurated War on Drugs, who drove up arrest rates, pushed for mandatory sentences, introduced "three strikes and you're out" rules, and made America the most prison-happy nation on the planet.

It wasn't always so. From 1925 to 1975, the country's incarceration rate was stable at roughly 100

prisoners per 100,000 population. Now it is 754 per 100,000, or almost one in 100 adult Americans behind bars. It's the highest rate in the world. Scholars are labeling it "mass incarceration."

In Britain, by contrast, the rate is just 148 of every 100,000 people behind bars; in Australia 129; in Japan 63.

Part of the problem is the habit of Congress and our state legislatures to pass laws mandating time behind bars for minor offenses, from writing bad checks to recreational drug use - offenses that would rarely trigger prison time in other countries.

And there's an alarming racial aspect too. For young black men with no more than a high school education, serving time in prison has become a normal life event.

The net result, Bruce Western and Becky Pettit write in *Daedalus*, a publication of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, is "a group of social outcasts who are joined by the shared experience of incarceration, crime, poverty, racial minority and low education."

It's not a problem that can be solved overnight. But a brave start could be made by undoing mandatory minimum sentences and returning discretion to judges. Also necessary: a system of community corrections, work-release programs, drug treatment, mental health care, educational catch-up, affordable housing and related services.

Would all that cost money, freaking out tea party types and their allies? Likely. But if you really want to cut government spending, the net bill would be a lot less than supporting (as we now do) 2.3 million people behind bars at public costs of up to \$50,000 a cell slot a year.

Another big potential for true conservatism: Stop dictating people's personal lifestyles by decriminalizing use of marijuana, cocaine, even far more dangerous drugs like heroin.

Public sentiment is moving that way. Polls indicate California's Proposition 19 to legalize marijuana possession, allowing a free and taxed market to develop, has a chance of passage - notwithstanding major politicians' ill-advised opposition.

Glenn Greenwald of the libertarian Cato Institute, endorsing the California measure, notes that "when a government no longer spends inordinate amounts of money on arresting, prosecuting and imprisoning drug users, that money can instead be used on highly effective treatment programs, as well as services, like methadone clinics, to limit drug-related harms."

Jeffrey Miron, Harvard economist and Cato Institute senior fellow, estimates our governments spend \$44 billion on drug prohibition every year, and miss out on close to \$50 billion in potential taxes if drugs were legalized.

Conservatives: Listen up!

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